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Naming Disney’s dwarfs

In the well-known exchange between Frances Clarke Sayers, the distinguished librarian, and Max Rafferty, the then Superintendent of Public Instruction in California, Rafferty, with some tendency to hyperbole, lauded Disney as “the greatest educator of this century.” Sayers, in opposition, maintained that “his treatment of folklore is without regard for its anthropological, spiritual, or psychological truths.” While the absolute polarity of the opinions expressed is, to be sure, unusual, there is no doubt but that the “Disney versions” of some of the classic folktales for children have received very short shrift indeed from the professional practitioners of children’s literature. Sendak relates his early fascination with Disney only to be embarrassed when he realized, much later on, “how Disney had despoiled beautiful stories.”

The focus of this paper will be in the area of “anthropological truth,” and its purpose will be to demonstrate that, from this perspective, every piece of folklore on which Disney laid his distinctive mark was not, thereby, totally “despoiled.” That Disney altered traditional tales is indisputable; that all of his alterations were, ipso facto, violations of “anthropological truth” is debatable. The Grimms themselves, according to a leading scholar of Germanic folktales, altered the tale we know as “Snow White” by substituting a stepmother for a mother (“to make the villainess an outsider in the family circle”). Alterations in folktales are part and parcel of the genre, a fact which is readily observable in the numerous variants of most tales. As Sayers suggests, however, the alterations must be consistent with the anthropological, spiritual, and psychological truth of the folktale.

I would like to offer as evidence the Disney version of the folkloric dwarfs
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in his production of "Snow White" and then to weigh the Disney rendition of the dwarf figure against the anthropological truth — the corpus of traits and behaviors pertaining to dwarfs in traditional folklore and mythology. The Disney dwarfs have been chosen for two reasons. First, they represent figures from traditional folklore and mythology that provide the necessary corpus of traits and behaviors against which to measure the validity of the Disney version. Second, the Disney dwarfs were singled out by Bruno Bettelheim in his *The Uses of Enchantment* as prime examples of "ill-considered additions to fairy tales." These additions (alterations) are the separate names that the Disney version gave to the dwarfs of "Snow White," which are not present in the Grimm Brothers version of the tale. According to Bettelheim, the Disney additions are "ill-considered" because they "seriously interfere with the unconscious understanding that they (dwarfs) symbolize an immature pre-individual existence which Snow White must transcend."4 We may, however, have to consider the possibility that the added names of the Disney dwarfs are interfering more with the interpretative bias than with the unconscious understanding, and that the Disney dwarf names may be far less "ill-considered" than inconvenient.

A strong suspicion of "inconvenience" is raised when one begins to consider the anthropological evidence. As a general statement, we might do well to consider the opinion of the late Stith Thompson, one of the leading authorities in the world on the folktale: "In his production of "Snow White" Walt Disney was particularly successful in catching the traditional conception of the dwarf."5 As it is highly unlikely that Thompson would have failed to note that the Disney dwarfs had names (and one-dimensional personalities), it may be safely assumed that he did not find this addition "ill-considered" from the point of view of traditional dwarf-lore. Indeed, it is in this objectionable area of naming the dwarfs that we can see just how successful Disney was in catching the traditional concept of the dwarf.

Admittedly, not all dwarfish figures in folklore are named; many are simply referred to as "a dwarf." On the other hand, it is quite possible to point to names like: Rumpelstilt, Rumpelgeist, Knirfiker, Gebhart, Tepenteren, and Titteli-Ture. These are all the names of folkloric dwarfs whose names are so integral to folktales that the guessing of their names is the tale.6 Interestingly enough, probably the best known of these named dwarfs (at least to us, because of the Grimm Brothers), *Rumpelstilt(skin)* appears in a tale derived from the oldest stratum of folkloric sources. Joseph Campbell (following the classification system of Frederich von der Leyen) lists "Rumpelstiltskin" (Grimm No. 55) as being derived from "primitive belief." The unnamed dwarfs of "Snow White" (Grimm No. 53) are, on the other hand, derived from a much more recent stratum: "chivalrous work of the middle ages."7 That the dwarfs of "Snow White" do not reflect particularly ancient belief